

De Gaulle's Policy: Prophecy or Atavism?

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Professor Howard Wiarda

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Seminar B

Oscar W. Clyatt, Jr.

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De Gaulle's Strategy: Prophecy or Atavism?

No post-war leader has had so strong a sense of personal mission as President Charles de Gaulle. Nor has any stamped his nation's policy so indelibly with his own unique style. De Gaulle's vision projected a Europe once again a community of several, free nation-states forming their policies according to the old rules of balance of power, but with France once again playing the dominant role. His approach was manipulation of France's position in the alignments of his day to reduce her supranational commitments and to regain her freedom of action.

De Gaulle demanded French equality with the USA and Britain in a condominium outside NATO, and NATO's virtual undoing as a military alliance. He played off a not yet resurgent Germany and the European Community against "Anglo-Saxon hegemony," the overthrow of which was his second major goal. And in pursuit of the primacy of France, he dealt with the Germans and other European community countries as junior partners toward whom France might at will reduce her commitments. In time De Gaulle's policy reached beyond Europe in overtures to enemies of the West in Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi.

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Nicar W. Wyatt, Jr.
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Dr. Howard Winick
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threat from Khrushchev's Soviet Union. He alienated allies who sought to accommodate French demands even as he supported basic lines of Western resistance to Soviet encroachment. For de Gaulle, however, the goal and payoff was the restoration of France as a great power in world councils and in the eyes of her own people.

When de Gaulle took charge of France's destiny in 1958, she was a country in deep eclipse. Beaten and occupied during World War II France had reemerged to national independence only by virtue of allied arms. The fourth republic replicated the economic stagnation and political instability of the pre-war third republic. Next to Italy it faced the greatest threat of communist subversion in early post-war Europe. By the time of de Gaulle's accession, moreover, France had already lost one colonial war in Southeast Asia and was embroiled in another losing war in Algeria.

On resuming power in 1958, de Gaulle sought by virtue of his charisma and prestige as wartime leader to personify France's national resurgence. He abolished the weak fourth republic and set in its place the fifth, presidential republic made in his own image as its strong and forceful executive. Promising independence of policy and restoration of "grandeur" to France, he systematically set about reducing all ties of French dependence on other powers, including cooperation with NATO partners. Henceforth, the test of all international initiatives proposed to France would be de Gaulle's own unsentimental and restrictive interpretation of French

national interests.

De Gaulle worked in troubled times. The resolve of the Western alliance was under severe test by the Soviets. With their new intercontinental ballistic missiles producing nuclear stalemate, Khrushchev was eager to probe the West at all points that promised gain. In a three year crisis leading to the construction of the Berlin wall, he menaced allied rights in Berlin, and the freedom of West Berlin itself, by threatening a separate peace with his East German clients that would turn the city over to them. In 1962 he placed medium range missiles in Cuba in an effort to reduce US resolve to defend its allies in Europe. Over those same years he gave support to renewed insurgency against Western allies in Southeast Asia.

In this confrontation with the Soviets de Gaulle saw France's fundamental interests as closely paralleling those of his major Western partners. The basic threat of Soviet aggression or nuclear miscalculation was the same to France as it was to the rest of Europe, Britain and the United States. Yet de Gaulle, who from the earliest days of the effort to liberate France had seen his policies dependent for their fulfillment on the power and strategy of his "Anglo-Saxon allies," viewed the East-West confrontation from a different perspective. He saw it as an opportunity for promoting his vision for France as well as a source of danger.

De Gaulle regarded France's policy and interests as once again at risk of being submerged in a broader strategic game dominated by the US and Britain. With a mind trained in the old diplomacy of balance of power and inured by harsh experience to the humiliation of French weakness, de Gaulle was receptive to the strains of particularism that still survived during the bi-polarity of the cold war in China, Yugoslavia, Germany, and Eastern Europe. His mentality formed in a different era of state and international relations, De Gaulle perceived that the post-war age of supranational ideological confrontation between military blocs must give way, as it had after the Congress of Vienna, to an era of competing nation states. It was necessary in his view only to stand firm in face of Khrushchev's bluster at the May 1960 summit and again to resist the Russian leader's demand for renegotiating Western rights in Berlin. De Gaulle was ahead of his time in viewing Khrushchev's failed gambits as signalling the end of a period of Soviet expansion and the prelude to an albeit still distant detente.

In this context, French interests were clear to de Gaulle. He had to position France to resume its historic place in the international state system in order to be able to shape the restoration of the multi-polar world of competing nation states. The irony was that despite his professed lack of faith in the integrated NATO military structure and the validity of the American nuclear umbrella, de Gaulle had confidence that the political

alliance of the West was sufficiently strong to withstand the Eastern challenge that his particularist policies would not undermine it. Thus, what made de Gaulle's behavior intolerable from the point of view of the allies was that his was a spoiler's game. His play was from a position of weakness. He directed his rough kind of diplomacy against his friends, who posed France no threat, rather than against the common enemy who did. His methods cannot be characterized as persuasion or bargaining either with incentives or coercion, but the manipulation of a constant, petulant threat, which he carried out in stages, to withdraw cooperation from the alliance. Unlike contemporary statesmen such as Willy Brandt and Chou En-lai, and later Anwar el-Sadat, de Gaulle worked in a permissive environment. He operated by making maximalist demands on allies who bent every effort to accommodate him.

Since de Gaulle's demands were predicated on complete policy independence based on control of a national nuclear deterrent, the allies could not meet them within the framework of the NATO alliance. It was difficult for the allies to understand his demands, rooted as deeply as they were in France's psychology of defeat and dependence. When de Gaulle became president, French power was relatively what it had been before the war. With low population growth and an ageing industrial structure, French power was far less than the potential of resurgent Germany. Confronted with dominant allies, Europe's early efforts at

consolidation in the EC, and the prospect of Germany's reemergence as the dominant power on the continent, de Gaulle felt he had to move quickly while he still had time to assure France's future. His solution was gradual withdrawal from the NATO military structure, which was completed in 1966, exclusion of Britain as a competitor from the EC to avoid diluting French influence there, and to build an independent nuclear deterrent that would place France in the league of nuclear powers and well beyond even a restored Germany. This meant total rejection by de Gaulle of early arms control initiatives such as the limited nuclear test ban treaty, ban on deployment of nuclear weapons on seabeds, and nuclear non-proliferation.

De Gaulle's plan for achieving these goals was to press maximalist demands which his NATO partners could not meet. His key demand was a tripartite directorate over allied affairs, above NATO, including a veto over use of nuclear power anywhere in the world. He temporized as allies sought to accommodate this demand against the time when he was prepared to implement his decision to withdraw from NATO. At the same time, he demonstrated his continued, but independent, support for the alliance's political objectives by his tough stance on Berlin and his supportive role during the Cuban missile crisis. His policy on matters of more peripheral concern to France--for example, Southeast Asia and the Dominican Republic--served as a low cost (to France) way to emphasize France's independence.

De Gaulle left France and the Western alliance a mixed legacy. He proved correct on the fate of the Soviet Union and the restoration of nation states as primary actors in foreign relations. He may arguably have contributed to these ends. France's example in the Western camp may have fortified China's particularism in the East and inspired nationalism in Eastern Europe. With its independent nuclear force and its resolve to defend French (and Western) interests in Europe and Africa against Soviet, or Soviet inspired subversion, French policy always confronted the Soviets with an unknown quantity. They had to calculate not only a NATO response, but an unpredictable response by France as well, to their strategy initiatives.

De Gaulle was less successful with his European policy. He never succeeded in establishing tutelage over Germany after their rapprochement. Nor did he obtain acquiescence in shaping the European Community into a form unilaterally pliable to French interests. The Italians and the Benelux countries proved steadfast in their commitment to the principle of European consolidation as spelled out in the Treaty of Rome. He did, however, succeed in establishing France as a medium power with an enhanced role in regional affairs, although not the leading power in Europe. That role was reserved to a fully resurgent and reunited Germany. For Europe as a whole, nonetheless, the success was larger. Thanks in part to French assertiveness, as well as to France's decision after de Gaulle's passing to admit Britain to the European Economic

Community, she assured that while Germany may lead, it will not dominate Europe.

The costs of de Gaulle's policy to the Western alliance were always clear. He threatened disruption of the Western alliance at the time of its greatest challenge. He persisted in an often needless dissension over issues great and small. And his haughty unbending style generated considerable frustration and ill will.

Still, with his insistence on national independence and prestige, de Gaulle acted decisively on his perception of a world order beyond the bi-polarity of the cold war. He promoted restoration of a system of nation states interacting within the old patterns of balance of power. It is such a system which has now emerged from the ruins of the Warsaw Pact. The US, and NATO, must now work within that system as they redefine their security needs. As the leading power the US must seek to insure that the new balance works to produce cooperation, or at least peaceful competition, rather than the conflict that marred the old international system that it so closely resembles.